

California; OUT THERE; Docents Soak Up Wetland Before Its Opening

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"Do you hear that 'witchity witchity'? That's a common yellowthroat!" said Bob Shanman, a 25-year birding veteran. "Learn to listen, and always look to the reeds." Shanman, a board member of Palos Verdes Audubon and Friends of Ballona Wetlands, was training a group of volunteers to be docents at Ballona's new freshwater marsh, which opens to the public today.

About half a mile east of the Pacific Ocean, the marsh is on the southwest corner of Lincoln and Jefferson boulevards in Playa del Rey. The huge Playa Vista development is still under construction just across Lincoln, but when you're in the midst of the marsh's 18 acres, the only sounds you can hear are the voices of the birds.

"We've lost 90% of the wetlands in California," said Shanman, owner of Wild Birds Unlimited in Torrance. "They are important to birds' migration. They're basically a Howard Johnson's for the birds underneath the Pacific Coast flyway. They're also a breeding ground for a lot of aquatic creatures."

In addition to supporting wildlife, wetlands filter out metals, grease and other urban runoff, in this case, preventing them from draining into the ocean.

Instead of the wetlands, new homes and a golf course would have occupied the site as part of the recently opened Playa Vista development. But a lawsuit by the Friends of Ballona Wetlands to prevent those uses led to an agreement by the developers to create the marsh and maintain it in perpetuity. When it's completed, the marsh will encompass 26 acres.

Twenty-two volunteer docents will lead tours every Saturday. For the unchaperoned, there is a public walkway, but it won't go all the way around to ensure protection of the marsh and its inhabitants.

Already, the marsh is a thriving oasis of mule fat shrubs and cattail marsh, California sycamore, Fremont cottonwood and California black walnut trees.

"Historically, this was a freshwater marsh," said Otella Wruck, a consultant for Friends of Wetlands who is responsible for the marsh's docent program. But over the last 150 years, oil wells were drilled into the marsh and crops -- most recently celery -- were grown there.

The reclaimed marsh eventually will be served by a 25-acre riparian corridor with pumped groundwater forming a stream to sustain wildlife. It will run along the Westchester bluffs almost to Centinela Boulevard, reproducing a creek that was filled in long ago.

A tiny hummingbird chasing a much larger swallow caught the attention of Dan Cooper, the director of bird conservation for Audubon California, who had joined the tour. "It's a migratory-type hummingbird," Cooper said. "They're really pugnacious."

Shanman estimated that 70% of the birds in the marsh were on their way to the northern United States, Canada or Alaska, where insects are plentiful and there's extended daylight to feed their young. A Southern California native, Heerman's gull is a reverse migrant that left in the fall to breed in Mexico and will be back here in mid-June.

"There's a snowy egret; look at the head plumes on it," said Ed Dewees, who has been an avid birder for 20 years and wants to be a wetlands docent.

"Birds are a measure of the health of the environment," Dewees said. "They migrate such long distances. If there's a problem at one end or the other of their journey, we'll know because of the drop-off in their numbers. Then we know we've got to go fix the problem that we've probably created."

A blue heron stood in the sun on a little island watching least sandpipers, which had stopped on their migratory path. They search for insects by bobbing their beaks into the sand like a sewing-machine stitch. "That sandpiper will nest at the Arctic Circle on the Bering Sea," Cooper said, "and then winter as far south as South America."

The longer days of spring trigger a hormonal change in migrating birds. That causes breeding behavior, which includes traveling far to nesting areas. Most fly by night and navigate by the stars.

No one was taking notes, but there was a lot to remember. A raven has a V-shaped tail and a crow has a curved tail. Ravens have Roman noses that are about three pencil widths thick. Crows flock together. Ravens are solitary or in pairs.

"Hear that?" Shanman drew attention to a killdeer's call, which sounds like its name. "A killdeer will feign a broken wing to draw predators away from its nest on the ground," he said. He rubbed the ground lightly with his foot and showed everyone the uneven patch of dirt. "That's all their nest consists of."

"Look at the snipe. Oh!" yelled Shanman. "This is seeing a snipe the way you'd want to." A common snipe was walking along the water's edge, oblivious to the group.

"They're a very shy, secretive bird," he said. "They don't come out in the open very often, especially when there's potential danger, and we're danger."

By the time the tour was over, 43 species of birds had been spotted. As many as 100 are predicted to be in the marsh over the next five years.

It may be a small corner of what it once was, but the birds paddling, swimming, dunking and drinking didn't seem to care.

Generations of their ancestors roosted and swam in this very place, and all the birds looked happy to have come back to their home away from home.

To book a tour of the marsh, contact Friends of Ballona Wetlands at (310) 306-5994, or go to the organization's Web site at www.ballonafriends.org.

